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(excerpted from WiredSafety.org and the Hartford Courant)

With the recent notoriety of Internet chat sites like MySpace.com or www.youtube.com, many parents have expressed concerns about how safe their children are when they are going online. MySpace.com, youtube.com and other similar sites are designed to allow people to share their creativity, pictures, and information with others. Sometimes people do this to find romance. Sometimes they do it to find friends with similar interest. While this may be okay for adults, it can be risky for kids. While MySpace prohibits anyone under 14 years of age from using their website, they can't prevent kids from lying about their age.

Because a website can't easily enforce rules for those who use it, parents need to talk with their children about not sharing personal information online. Personal information includes pictures, names and addresses, schools they attend, cell and phone numbers and many other less obvious things, such as the name of their school team, ethnic background and even a mall near your house.

So what do you, as a parent, do? First you need to find out if your child has a page on one of these sites. The best way to find out if your child has a profile on this or another similar site is to ask them. If you're not sure that your child is being honest with you, you can search MySpace.com (or the other sites) using their e-mail address, or by searching for their school. (You click on "search" and enter their email address or full name in the appropriate search box.)

If you find that your child has a profile on the Web site, you should review it. It's amazing how much you can learn about your child by reading their profiles. Does it contain personal information, such as their full name, address or phone numbers? Has your child posted photos? Are they photos of themselves or someone else? Are they sharing poems they write or provocative comments about themselves or others?

If you want the profile removed (you must remove your child's profile if they are under age), first ask your child to remove it themselves. If that doesn't work, MySpace.com has a section explaining how to remove a page. If you find someone who is underage, you can report it there as well. It's not as easy a procedure as the other Web sites.

A good thing to do is to ask your kids why they created the profile. You might learn that they wanted to share their thoughts with others, make new friends or even allow others in their school to get to know them better. But not all of their motives are as noble or safe. Some may be interested in meeting new romantic interests or role-playing inappropriately online. And when a young preteen lies about their age posing as a seventeen year old at the site, that can be a serious problem. Others in their late teens might approach your child thinking they were older. That's bad for everyone.

If you discover that your child is posting provocative comments or inappropriate images online, it's time for the tough talk. The one about stranger dangers and how that cute fourteen year old boy they meet online may not be

cute, may not be fourteen and may not be a boy. (Parents of young boys need to understand that their children are equally at risk. About one-third of the cases of Internet sexual exploitation are men exploiting boys.) Children need to realize that there are real risks relating to meeting strangers offline.

It's not easy raising children anymore. It is even harder when the parent is expected to be expert in Internet, cell phone and interactive game risks. Just remember that while your kids may know more than you do about technology, you know more about life. And you are allowed to set the rules and enforce them. You're still the parent! There is software you can install that will record what your kids say and post online. There is even one that will e-mail you reports at work. Also, check your parental control programs. Many, such as AOL's and MSN's, can block access to social-networking Web sites or other sites you think are inappropriate for your younger child. There are many other products you can purchase to block sites as well. Just remember that the best filter is the one between your children's ears.

Your child might be at risk if he/she:

- Spends large amounts of time online; especially at night
- Turns the computer off or quickly changes the screen view when you enter the room
- Withdraws from the family
- Uses someone else's online account
- Receives phone calls from people you don't know
- Receives mail, gifts or packages from people you don't know

Or if you:

- Find pornography on your child's computer
- Find long distance number you don't recognize on your phone bill.

To help minimize the risk:

- Talk to your child about sexual victimization and potential online dangers
- Spend time online with your child
- Keep the computer in a common room
- Use parental controls offered by service providers
- Randomly check your child's email, and make sure their account is accessible
- Tell your child never to arrange a face-to-face meeting with anyone met online
- Don't allow children to post pictures of themselves on the Internet
- Tell them never to give out personal information such as their name, address, school or phone number
- Don't let them download pictures from an unknown source
- Teach them never to respond to obscene or suggestive messages or postings
- Explain how what they hear or see online may not be true.

For more information on how to protect your child on the Internet, you can visit www.wiredsafety.org, www.wiredkids.org, www.StopCyberbullying.org, or contact Human Services at 665-8590.